

Fresno doles out nearly \$8 million in excess city funds

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Fresno's bean counters took a final crack at the financial books for the fiscal year that ended this past June 30, and the end result was a pile of leftover cash totaling close to \$8 million.

Known as a "true up," it takes a real-world look at what was actually spent versus what was budgeted. And the city ended up with unanticipated revenues of \$4.1 million and expenditure savings of \$3.8 million. That means the cash carryover was \$7.9 million higher than the council-approved carryover of \$12.5 million.

On Thursday, the Fresno City Council got a look at what Mayor Ashley Swearengin's administration planned to do with the money and, after some cursory questioning and some minor tweaking, approved the plan on a 6-0 vote. Council Member Sal Quintero was absent.

Without a doubt, city officials made sure to spread the wealth across the city, doling out the extra funds in one way or another to each council district. They also directed money to some high-profile issues the city has dealt with lately.

Among them:

- \$645,000 for the Fire Department, with a focus toward more training personnel and training classes. This expenditure came from recommendations in a study commissioned after Fresno fire Capt. Pete Dern fell through a garage roof while battling a blaze on March 29.
- \$1.2 million to open 16 school sites in the Fresno Unified and Central Unified school districts for weekend recreational activities. City officials had announced this plan earlier in the week. The move would add around 340 acres of badly needed green space in the city, especially in areas that are currently underserved by parks.
- \$71,400 for two new code enforcement officers to perform spot check inspections on multi-family units. This proposal came out of the Summerset Village apartment complex issue in central Fresno, where residents went without heat and hot water for two weeks. The matter ended up shining a spotlight on poorly maintained apartment complexes in the city, and earlier this month the city announced it was forming a code enforcement strike team to crack down on blight in the city's apartments.

All three of those expenses are for the current year, but will be ongoing. The full-year cost for the code enforcement officers, for instance, will be \$150,000 – money the city will have to budget on an ongoing basis.

City officials said around 65 percent of the additional money was considered onetime savings. In their recommendations, city official proposed spending 75 percent of the extra money on one-time capital projects.

For instance, \$300,000 will go to repairing sidewalks in the Melody Park neighborhood, \$900,000 will go to repaving stretches of Bullard Avenue west of Blackstone Avenue, and \$520,000 will go to outreach workers for the homeless.

The remaining 25 percent will go to ongoing expenses.

Only a few items came under scrutiny from council members.

Among them was the fire department's money, which will provide increased funding for training classes and nine additional positions, including an additional deputy chief and three additional battalion chiefs, all under the auspices of safety and training.

“That’s a lot of safety personnel,” Councilman Steve Brandau said.

Fire Chief Kerri Donis defended the expenditure.

Councilman Lee Brand also questioned \$250,000 for a lobbyist in Sacramento. He said he wanted periodic reviews to ensure the expenditure is worth it.

In all the recommendations, the council made just one change. It took \$400,000 proposed for repairs to the spiral parking garage at Van Ness and Inyo avenues, and another at Van Ness and Merced Street, and instead put it in a fund for infrastructure repair such as filling potholes, fixing sidewalks, repairing street lights or trimming trees. Already, the city proposed \$200,000 from the excess funds to fix streetlights and trim trees. Together, the money will now total \$600,000.

The city also put away money that will likely be needed in the future.

- The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has reviewed the city’s federal grants program, and there is a high likelihood the city will have to repay some money. The Swearingin administration proposed setting aside \$500,000, saying that amount would be a “worst-case scenario.”
- \$80,000 in additional funds for the police department’s contract attorney.

Considering the size of the General Fund, Brand said coming within \$7.9 million of a perfectly balanced budget was a pretty good outcome.

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